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## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Here's a primer on vermiculite in insulation and gardening products:

**QUESTION: Is all vermiculite contaminated?**

**ANSWER:** No, however, any vermiculite that come from the Libby, Mont., mine may be. That mine operated from the 1920s until 1990, and for several decades supplied 80 percent of the world's vermiculite.

**Q: I used vermiculite in gardening and potted plants. Am I in danger?**

**A:** Probably not. An EPA study showed the health risk is low, and vermiculite sold after 1990 shouldn't contain asbestos. People who worked daily with vermiculite in enclosed facilities like greenhouses may be at greater risk.

**Q: Is my insulation vermiculite?**

**A:** If it is the pebble-like, pour-in product light brown or shiny in color, it probably is. If it comes in a blanket, or roll, it is not.

**Q: What should I do if I have it?**

**A:** First, do not disturb it by crawling around in your attic or even storing boxes in your attic. That could release asbestos fibers into the air. If you plan to remodel or do renovations that would disturb it, hire a professional trained and certified in asbestos work.

**Q: Is it a hazard if I don't disturb it?**

**A:** Usually not, although the fibers may seep through ceiling

fixtures and even electrical outlets. Furnace air ducts in attics also can disturb fibers with vibrations, and send them to other parts of the home. A certified lab can test the air in your home.

**Q: Isn't asbestos banned?**

**A:** No. In 1989, the EPA issued a rule banning most asbestos products. However, that ban was overturned by a federal appeals court. It is still widely used in products, including brake linings and some cement products.

**Q: If I have to go in my attic, will a mask protect me?**

**A:** Wear a respirator, about \$40 at hardware stores. A cloth or paper mask offers no protection. Disturb the vermiculite as little as possible and avoid getting dust on shoes or clothes.

**Q: Can I have my insulation tested?**

**A:** Yes, although the EPA does not recommend testing because of technical problems with the testing procedures that need to be refined. If you do test, insist the lab is certified by the American Industrial Hygiene Association. Also insist that your sample is tested for winchite and richterite.

*Sources: Environmental Protection Agency; Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry; Protech Environmental Services; Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth; American Environmental Consultants; Lon Grossman, certified asbestos contractor.*

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products, are at risk.

Patterson, of Troy, dumped the Zonolite by the bagful into the attic when he was about 12 years old, spreading it through the rafters and "literally swimming in it and choking on the dust until I was gagging."

For years afterward, he and friends would spend time in the attic listening to records and horsing around.

Now he has asbestosis, a scarring of the lungs caused by asbestos exposure. He carries portable oxygen bottles with him, and has shortness of breath and pain in his chest — especially on muggy days and in moldy buildings.

Others with Zonolite in their homes, and people who used the vermiculite in potting soil mix or for gardening and other products also might be at risk, say federal officials. But unless exposures are prolonged or intense, the hazard is low, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. It recommends leaving the material alone in most cases.

"There is no safe level of asbestos exposure," said Lon Grossman, a certified asbestos contractor/supervisor who also writes a home care column for the Free

### ASBESTOS HELP

- For a list of licensed asbestos workers, contractors and inspectors in Michigan, go to [www.cis.state.mi.us/asbestos\\_program/home.htm](http://www.cis.state.mi.us/asbestos_program/home.htm) or call the state's program at 517-322-1320.
- For Environmental Protection Agency information on vermiculite insulation, visit [www.epa.gov/asbestos/insulation.html](http://www.epa.gov/asbestos/insulation.html)
- For general information on asbestos, visit [www.epa.gov/asbestos/help.html](http://www.epa.gov/asbestos/help.html) or call the agency's hot line at 800-471-7127. Press 3 to speak to a specialist.
- To read Thursday's Part 1 of this series, go to [www.freep.com](http://www.freep.com)

Press. "I'd remove it."

Removal, which should be done by a licensed contractor, could cost \$10,000 or more, according to Jerrod Mason, president of Protech Environmental Services of Ann Arbor.

Mason, whose company tests vermiculite mailed in by home owners, said about 1 in 3 samples proves positive for asbestos.



WILLIAM ARCHIE/Detroit Free Press

**Russell Patterson, 47, changes a hose on his oxygen machine in his Troy home. As a child, Patterson helped insulate the attic with Zonolite insulation and spent hours up there hanging out. He's been diagnosed with asbestosis and needs oxygen to help him breathe.**